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As a campaigner for women's rights Esther Chávez was instrumental in drawing the attention of the world to the murder of hundreds of women around Ciudad Juárez, on Mexico's border with the US.

Their bodies were dumped in the desert around the city, or left on patches of urban wasteland, in a series of killings that began in the early 1990s and for years were treated with indifference or denial by the authorities. She also founded Casa Amiga, Mexico's first rape crisis centre, which became a refuge for female victims of domestic violence in Ciudad Juárez. There are now 50 or so such centres throughout the country. Many of the women who sought shelter there were, like most of the murder victims, young, single migrants from the impoverished Mexican countryside who were attracted to the booming border city by the prospect of employment in the garment assembly plants, known as maquiladoras, that cluster around the frontier. The women provide cheap labour for the factories, which turn out clothing for US brands using imported materials, which are re-exported after processing. They had no families to support them, and nobody to take an interest in their fate until Chávez began to speak out.

The authorities showed little interest in investigating the killings, as politicians were reluctant to do anything that might cause problems with the US-owned and Japanese-owned maquiladoras.

After Chávez shamed them into taking action, the government of the state of Chihuahua, in which Ciudad Juárez is located, eventually appointed a special prosecutor to look into the killings, and set up a dedicated unit to investigate sexual offences. They have had some successes, but Chávez, among others, believed that many innocent men were framed and condemned by a system desperate to be seen to be doing something about a state of affairs that was seriously damaging Mexico's international image. Esther Chávez was an accountant for an American food-processing company who moved to Juárez from her home town of Chihuahua, the capital of the state, in 1982. Ten years later she founded the 8 March Organisation, an umbrella group for campaigners defending women's rights in the frontier region. Using her accountancy training, she began, in 1993, to compile detailed files on the women whose mutilated bodies had been appearing in increasing numbers around the rapidly growing city. She gave the municipal and state authorities no peace, lobbying, organising and leading protest demonstrations. She came to the conclusion that the killings were not the work of a serial killer but reflected a much more complex phenomenon. One of her theories was that many men, in a country that defines the term machismo, resented women gaining employment in the textile plants, which gave them an independent income, and some began to take violent reprisals. The term feminicidio was coined to describe what was happening. Other activists thought that the

victims were used in drug-trafficking gangs' initiation rites, or were - are - simply kidnapped and killed to demonstrate that the gangs run the city and can do as they please there.

Chávez also believed that Chihuahua state police, judicial officials and business leaders were themselves implicated in the murders. The body count has remained high. Local NGOs believe that about 350 women were killed in and around Juárez in 2009, but this figure has been dwarfed by the wave of drug-related violence that has consumed the city in recent years.

Just before Chávez died, her denunciations were vindicated by a ruling of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, which ordered the Mexican Government to pay compensation to the families of three victims whose murders in 2001 had not been fully investigated. Evidence had been ignored and suspects had been bullied into making false confessions. This ruling cast doubt on an earlier claim by a special prosecutor that 80 per cent of the murder cases had been solved.

In 2008 Chávez was presented with Mexico's National Human Rights Award by President Calderón. But she was not dazzled by the glowing tributes paid to her then. A few months later she bitterly criticised the President for appointing a former Chihuahua special prosecutor, Arturo Chávez Chávez, as federal attorney-general. He had been in charge of investigations in Juárez during a period when the feminicidios were at their height.

Chávez was the model for a character in the Mexican film El Traspatio (Backyard), which was shot in Ciudad Juárez, and has been entered for an Academy Award this year as Best Foreign Language Film.

Esther Chávez Cano, women's rights campaigner, was born on June 2, 1933. She died of cancer on December 25, 2009, aged 76

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